Music at Luther College, especially at Christmas

By Wilfred F. Bunge

We end this series with music—an appropriate ending, since music has been a part of the curriculum from the beginning of Luther College in 1861. The performance of music at Luther began on student initiative. Singing groups formed as early as 1869. A string group organized in 1877, two violins and a cello. It soon developed into a small orchestra. Students organized a band in 1878—instruments purchased from a discontinued Decorah community band—the modest beginning of the Concert Band that toured Europe already in 1914 and 1936, and in recent years Japan and China.

Haldor Hanson was the first professor of music on the faculty, 1888-90 and 1894-1904. He provided professional direction of music groups—band, orchestra, choir, and glee club—and organized the Luther College Musical Union to promote music activities. Carlo Sperati succeeded Hanson in 1905 and became a legend as director of the Concert Band from 1905 to 1943.

The performance of Händel’s Messiah as a Christmas tradition began in 1921 at the Grand Opera House with a combined college and community choir. This continued until 2004. Many students over the years commented that singing in the Messiah chorus was one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives. On December 18, 1944, Weston Noble wrote from Germany that in the midst of the noise of war his thoughts had turned to the performance of the Messiah in Decorah, the quiet peace of the Pastoral Symphony and the reassurance of the Hallelujah Chorus. The memory from his student years sustained him through those dark days. That he would himself conduct such performances for 56 years would scarcely have occurred to this 22-year-old member of the 750th Tank Battalion.

A special feature of the Messiah performances, especially in the Noble years, was the opening of participation to anyone interested. Often members of the faculty and staff joined the chorus, and on performance evenings many graduates returned to participate. In later years there were upwards of a thousand participants.

An alternate concert tradition began in 1981. Craig Arnold, then a junior member of the music faculty, offered an evening of a variety of Christmas music with the choral groups he directed. That concert grew in popularity over the years, eventually extending to two evenings and then three, alongside the performance of the Messiah. When Noble retired in 2005, the alternate concert tradition—first named Juletide, later Christmas at Luther—replaced the Messiah concert tradition and extended to five performances.

Christmas at Luther weekend is the first full weekend of December. Some 600 student musicians participate, members of six choral groups, the symphony orchestra, the faculty organist, and most recently the bell choir. Approximately 8,000 people attend the five performances. What a treasure to enjoy, ending the year with the gift of such wondrous music.